

All Saints 2021
Sunday, October 31, 2021
North Decatur Presbyterian Church
Rev. David Lewicki, preaching

1 Cor. 1:2-3: ²To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints,

Romans 8:27: ²⁷ the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Ephesians 2:19: ¹⁹So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God

Colossians 1:11-12: ¹¹May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully ¹²giving thanks to [God], who has enabled^[a] you^[b] to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light.

Every year, All Saints Day invites us into a time of wondering. What is it about certain people that they have such a profound effect on our lives? Why is it, that even after they are gone, they do not disappear? The saints in our lives linger. In a way that stretches our rational minds, the saints are very much here.

The word “Saints” gets thrown around a lot in the New Testament, but if you heard just now, there is something interesting about the way saints gets used. *It’s always plural.* We are used to using the word to talk about individuals. But there is no individual saint in scripture. Saints are always a group. A group fish is a school. A group of geese is a gaggle. A group of frogs is an army. A group of flamingos is a flamboyance. But a group of Christians—they are called saints.

Sainthood, it seems, is not a solitary pastime. There are no “lone ranger” saints. No go-it-by-yourself, rugged individualist saints. A saint can only ever be part of a group—a saint belongs to a body of saints—to a group of people whose lives are being formed in the way of Jesus.

That’s not, of course, how we think of saints. We think of them as super Christians. Surpassingly generous. Unbelievable grace under extreme pressure. Extraordinary good works. I think I know *why* we like to think of our saints as super Christians. I, personally, like vicariously participating in their goodness. Basking in their glow. After all, living in the way of Jesus—being unfailingly selfless and kind and forgiving—it’s such a beautiful life... but it’s all so hard. I like thinking that no matter how badly I fail at this Christian thing, there are people out there whose lives actually look like Jesus. Thank God there was a Dorothy Day. And a Martin King. At least some Christians get it right. Not me... and not you. Right?

But while these saints are inspiring—sometimes so inspiring they are the ones who draw us to Christianity in the first place—it’s not right for us to hold them up as transcendent figures. For one, I guarantee you that not one of them is anything other than flesh and bone and spirit, just like us. For another, they are far from worthy of being on a pedestal. Look closely enough at any saint—rub off the halo, let go of your childlike admiration—and you will see that they are

flawed. Sometimes deeply, even tragically. Mother Theresa's order practiced physical abuse. Jean Vanier, founder of L'Arche is credibly accused of harassment and abuse. If we try to put these saints on a pedestal, we risk that our faith comes crashing down with them when we discover they are every bit as flawed as we are.

What I want you to know today is that *there are saints*. There are people all around us whose lives embody the most wonderful of virtues: who give generously and sacrificially, who are kind and compassionate and merciful. **But a saint is only and ever a member of a community of saints. If there is one saint, then we are all saints. If any of us is capable of virtue, then we all are capable of that virtue. The saints are not good because of something inherent in them. They are good because the love of God flows in and through the Body of Christ and eventually it finds its way into each of us.**

That's the hardest thing to accept about saints. It's that you are one of them.

I know when I look in the mirror, I don't see a one. I see what I've always seen: a shy, quiet boy who really wants people to like him. I see a middle aged man who is moody, and restless, and feels overwhelmed by the basics of life sometimes. I never walk around like I've got a gold halo on my head. I'm guessing you don't either.

We never see it in ourselves. Thank God we see it in others. The saints of God have drawn so close to you, that they have changed your life indelibly for the better. They are the reason you are in church today; they showed you what faith looks like—a saint could be the very reason you're alive today.

This church has been full of saints over the years. We're celebrating 66 years today at NDPC, it's our 66th birthday as a congregation. I'm going to name some of our saints—you will know some of the names if you've been around for a while, but others of you might have to ask about them and learn about them.

- How about Hazen Smith and Janie McCutcheon, the first two women elected elders in this congregation, in 1966; more to follow Frances Query, Donna Rooney, Martha Vardeman, Mary Alice Kemp.
- There were men, here too. Good men. With the last names Slack, Cherry, Hood. More recently Vardeman, Godfrey, Laseter.
- There were couples who were pillars of the church together. Dick and Mary Ellis, Charles and Gretta Dewald.
- There were pastors, who preaching and cared for us: Tony Tucker, Henrietta Wilkerson and Albert Curry Winn
- How many Sunday School volunteers welcomed children into classrooms and made them feel seen and loved?
- All of the youth group leaders and Scout leaders; building committee chairs and property chairs.
- Musicians like Virginia Lovelace who led us in song.

- Missionaries – people who have served all over the world and brought back to this congregation a deep humility; Baldwins and Boyles, Cogswells, Etheridges.
- Those who nourished deep relationships with those who were struggling and suffering in our community: Rudy Velasco, Nelda Hollender, hundreds of others whose hands and hearts were freely given in service.
- Always... there was someone to visit the family with the new baby, or take a meal to someone who was sick, or make and serve the lemonade.
- Legend says that someone took up the rug in their den every Sunday so the babies in the nursery wouldn't crawl on the bare floor; what was the name of the saint that rolled up their rug and brought it to church?

Not a single one of those people I just mentioned had a halo on their head. Not a one thought of themselves as a saint. But you knew better. You sat next to them, & have been taught by them, and shared holy communion and potluck suppers with them and you have turned to them and you said "may the peace of Christ be with you" and they said "and also with you" and it was.

God's love—this most powerful of all forces in the universe—has one main way of working. God love abides within the communion of saints. And it eventually finds its way into you.

What is a saint? The writer Frederick Buechner says it perfectly:

"To be a saint is to be human.... To be a saint is to live not with the hands clenched to grasp, to strike, to hold tight to a life that is always slipping away the more tightly we hold it; but it is to live with the hands stretched out both to give and receive with gladness. To be a saint is to work and weep for the broken and suffering of the world, but it is also to be strangely light of heart in the knowledge that there is something greater than the world that mends and renews. And maybe more than anything else, to be a saint is to know joy. Not happiness that comes and goes with the moments that occasion it, but joy that is always there like an underground spring no matter how dark and terrible the night."

Friends, we are part of the communion of saints. We have seen them and known them. And they are not far away. This morning, we invited you to remember someone who has been a saint in your life. We are going to read the names of the saints—both famous and those known perhaps only to you. When you hear the names of your saints called out. I want you to stand up, raise your card, and say in a loud voice, "present!"

[liturgy follows in which we read aloud the names of every person identified by the congregation...]